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SUBJECT: JOINT TASK FORCE BRAVO - U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN
HONDURAS APPLAUDED AND CRITICIZED

REF: 02 TEGUCIGALPA 2444

1. (U) SUMMARY: Since 1982 the U.S. military has maintained a presence at the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) airbase at Soto Cano (commonly known by Hondurans as Palmerola). The base is also the site of the Honduran Air Force Academy. Currently, Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B) houses more than 600 U.S. troops and employs more than 700 Hondurans. Through salaries, contracts, tourism and donations, JTF-B contributes approximately USD 30 million annually to the Honduran economy. The initial mission of JTF-B was to deter aggression from the Nicaraguan National Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN). Today, U.S. forces train the HOAF; conduct bilateral operations in counternarcotics; and provide humanitarian assistance, medical emergencies, and disaster relief. JTF-B is also a first responder for natural disaster crises for the entire Central American region. Now some 20 years later, with the threat of communism gone, some Hondurans continue to question the validity of the U.S. presence at Soto Cano. END SUMMARY

U.S. PRESENCE BENEFICIAL

2. (SBU) Since 1982 the U.S. military has maintained a presence at the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) airbase at Soto Cano (commonly known by Hondurans as Palmerola). For the HOAF, the base, also the site of the Honduran Air Force Academy, represents a strategic relationship with the U.S. military. With the U.S. Southern Command departure from Panama in 1999, JTF-B now serves as the principal military presence for the U.S. in Central America. JTF-B is the first responder to crises in the region, and supports counternarcotics and counterterrorism missions when directed from Southern Command. Moreover, it conducts and supports recovery and evacuation operations in all of the Central American (CENTAM) region. Additionally, the task force maintains and jointly operates the only C-5 capable airfield base in the region. It provides support for joint combined exercises and unit training, theater deployable surgical team, all-source intelligence, an operational footprint for immediate reaction forces, and maintains pre-positioned stocks for theater-wide military operations. Secondly, JTF-Bravo conducts and supports humanitarian civic assistance and military civic action operations, and supports USAID disaster relief programs.

HONDURAN PERSPECTIVE VARIES

3. (SBU) Hondurans find themselves sitting on both sides of the fence in regards to the U.S. presence at Soto Cano. On the one hand, many recognize the strategic bilateral relationship that is maintained between the two countries. The training and operation resources provided to the HOAF are also recognizably important beneficial aspects of the base. Furthermore, the more than USD 30 million in economic activity generated by the base makes a direct and significant economic impact on the surrounding Comayagua Valley. On the other hand, Honduran critics of the base voice several concerns over the JTF-B mission. First, some knee-jerk critics say that the U.S. uses the base more for selfish unilateral motives rather than with the intention of helping the HOAF and the people of CENTAM in general. This view unfortunately also generates the belief that the U.S. should provide Honduras with greater monetary compensation for use of the land, above and beyond the rent the USG currently pays. Another criticism is over JTF-B's missions. The Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), a Honduran NGO that focuses on alleged human rights abuses from the 1980s and is skeptical of a U.S. military role in Honduras, recently criticized JTF-B for possible violations of Honduran sovereignty in counternarcotics operations. Often, this type of criticism reflects a lack of knowledge of what the base does. PolOff met May 19 with Bertha Oliva de Nativi, the COFADEH General Coordinator, to answer her questions and allay her concerns.

PolOff emphasized that JTF-B undertakes all actions working in cooperation with the GOH and referred her to the Ministry of Defense if she had more questions about Soto Cano. PolOff is also providing Oliva with public relations information from JTF-B.

COMMERCIAL AIRPORT?

14. (U) In August of 2002, President Ricardo Maduro announced that he was considering the possibility of converting the airstrip at Soto Cano for use by commercial airlines. Currently, the small size of the Toncontin airport in Tegucigalpa severely limits the type of aircraft that can safely land there (refTel). This primarily affects cargo planes used for exportation of Honduran products. A joint commercial-military airport at Soto Cano could mean greater commercialization and revenue possibilities for Comayagua and the surrounding area, especially for the development of textile factories (maquilas). However, such a project would necessitate very careful planning so as not to compromise the security and safety of military operations that currently take place at the base. To date, no official plans for a civilian airport project have been developed.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: While a small minority of outspoken critics question the motive of a U.S. military presence in Honduras, many understand the benefits of having JTF-B stationed at Soto Cano. JTF-B was instrumental in providing disaster relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, and continues to provide tangible benefits to the host country through medical visits and other humanitarian missions. The GOH is also grateful for the monetary contribution JTF-B provides to the domestic economy and the stabilizing effect a U.S. military presence provides to regional security. END COMMENT.
Pierce